

# 1,000ccs of OTC Dynamite

## Motorcycle accidents/fatalities on the rise

By Dave Crozier

*"She turned in front of me thinking she could make it. Instead, she hit me head-on. I flew over the handlebars and into her windshield. The back of my head bounced off her steering wheel, and then I was thrown face first into a telephone pole ... If I hadn't been wearing my helmet, parts of my head would have been smashed into the windshield and the left side of my face would have been left on the pole... I was in and out of consciousness for the first four days... My brain swelled so bad the doctors thought they would have to drill holes in my head to relieve the pressure ... I lost most of my memory and even had to learn how to walk again... It took years of hard work to get me back to normal - well about as normal as I will ever be ... I am living a life that would have ended if I hadn't been wearing my helmet the night that girl turned in front of me."*

Master Sgt. Shane Curtis, Aviation Systems Safety Manager, U.S. Army Safety Center, Fort Rucker, Ala., recounting his accident on a Yamaha 650. Excerpt taken from the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Web site.

**D**on't stop reading now because you've heard this story before, or you think this is just going to be your typical "you must wear a helmet and all required personal protective equipment (PPE)" type of article. Well, it is sort of, but keep on reading anyway because this is really more about your chances as a motorcyclist to become a statistic, whether it is your fault or not, whether you wear all the proper PPE or not, and whether you attend a motorcycle safety course or not.

In 2004, 3,927 motorcyclists were killed and another 76,000 were injured in traffic crashes in the United States. Motorcycle fatalities have increased each year between 1997 and 2004, with a total increase of 1,184, or more than 85 percent. About 60 percent of the increase in motorcycle fatalities for 2004 came from the 40-and-over age groups. Nearly one out of four motorcycle operators (24 percent) involved in fatal crashes in 2003 were operating the vehicle with an invalid license at the time of the crash. Alcohol plays a major role in motorcycle fatalities; almost half of the motorcycle operators who died in single-vehicle crashes in 2003 had blood/alcohol concentrations (BAC) levels of .08 or higher.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the number of persons killed on motorcycles has out-paced, percentage-wise, all other fatalities involving motor vehicles, an increase of 7.3 percent in 2004 alone.

You see these statistics and you say, "So what! That seems small for the entire U S of A. Besides, I am in the Army. I have

survived Iraq and Afghanistan. That kind of thing won't happen to me." According to officials and those who are tracking the trends in the Army, you are wrong, dead wrong.

Privately owned vehicle accidents in the Army remain the number one non-combat killer of Soldiers.



Courtesy photo

**A motorcycle is no match for a dump truck. Notice the lightened area on the grill where the rider's helmet is wedged.**

"POV [statistics] all around are killing more people than IEDs are," said Michael Evans, Chief of Programs for the Army Traffic Safety Program, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center, Fort Rucker, Ala.

And the trends for motorcyclists are rising at an alarming rate. The reason officials say ... it's the sense Soldiers have of being invincible; having survived the Global War on Terrorism, coupled with the fact that many Soldiers now have money they normally would not have because of the tax-free and combat pay they received while deployed. Hence, they can afford, and are buying the biggest and baddest bikes there are ... Harley Davidson's, Suzuki's, Yamaha's – "Ninja bikes and crotch rockets" that can go from zero to 60 in less time than it takes you to say it.

The folks at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center heard rumors about Soldiers buying thousands of bikes from the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) and picking them up as soon as they got back to the States and decided to look into the trend.

"We had initial indications that [AAFES] had in the area of about 5,000 motorcycle orders, but once we did some checking it wasn't quite that many," Evans said. "There were like 5,000 orders for vehicles, but motorcycles only made up 1,700 to 1,900."

After finding that the rumors weren't quite true, Evans did note that the number of motorcycle purchases still reflected 40 percent of all the new vehicles ordered by Soldiers returning to the states.

One Army unit that found a lot of these statistics to be true was the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment based out of Fort Campbell, Ky. Not only were a lot of their Soldiers coming back to the States and buying "big bikes" but they also mirrored the national statistics for average age of riders and accident rates.

According to Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Lance Hoffman, the regiment's Safety NCO, the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR held the distinction of being the highest rates in Special Ops for motorcycle accidents. It was so bad he said, his commander was trying to find ways to outlaw motorcycles in the regiment.

"We had a rash where we were just losing guys to motorcycle accidents left and right and it was becoming the most costly thing for our Soldiers, not necessarily to fatalities, but to injuries and days lost at work," Hoffman said. "So our commander was trying to find a way to curb that, and obviously [outlawing motorcycles] wasn't going to happen, but it did show his concern about the problem."

What the 160<sup>th</sup> did instead was launch a multi-phased approach to see if it could correct the problem. Through a unit survey the regiment found it had more than 500 Soldiers who rode motorcycles, and since OIF and OEF, that number has risen to almost 800 riders. Using spot inspections, Hoffman and others checked the Soldiers for licenses and Motorcycle Safety Founda-

tion (MSF) course cards, whether the rider had an approved DOT helmet, and was wearing a safety vest and so on. What they found, Hoffman said, was that some riders didn't have all the required inspection items and were turned away from the compound.

"The Army standard is that they must have all these things, but sometimes it gets lost in the transmission. So we started an education campaign and started talking about non-line of duty statements, and we talked about the two Soldiers from Ft. Campbell who were killed on motorcycles and were determined to be non-line of duty accidents (generally meaning the Soldier's family or estate would have to reimburse the Army for all costs associated with the accident)," said Hoffman. "The problem we initially ran into at the regiment is that Kentucky and Tennessee have different laws regarding helmets. Kentucky doesn't care if you wear one and Tennessee makes you wear one. We got that fixed through education [on the Army regulations]."

Hoffman noted that Army Regulation 385-55 supersedes state laws for Army riders and that regulations requires that riders will wear a DOT approved helmet and other personal protective equipment at all times.

The other phase of that fix came in the form of the regiment providing aggressive motorcycle safety training through the Motorcycle Safety Foundation Basic Riders Course, and by giving Soldiers an opportunity to ride a motorcycle under supervised conditions before they bought a motorcycle.

"The Army says a Soldier must have an MSF card before he or she can ride a motorcycle. So we are providing that opportunity for Soldiers to ride a motorcycle before they purchase one and get hurt or get a non-line-of-duty determination."

The 160<sup>th</sup> has contracted with the state of Tennessee to have an instructor come to the regiment and teach the MSF Basic Riders Course on motorcycles that the regiment has bought just for that training. The 160<sup>th</sup> has five motorcycles it owns and maintains – mostly smaller 250cc bikes with two larger bikes for handling comparisons. The first day of the two-day course consists of classroom instruction on the laws regarding motorcycle operations and a familiarization with the motorcycle itself. The second day is spent riding the motorcycle, learning emergency braking techniques, turning the bike in all directions and general traffic laws.

"We found out that this really worked for us because the first class had 60 riders and... 18 of them said they found out that they just couldn't ride. It wasn't for them," Hoffman said. "So we considered that a success because we asked those same Soldiers if they were going to purchase a bike before they took the course, and they all said they were going to until their commander told them they had to come to this course first. They basically told us, if they hadn't taken the class they would have

## Army Fatalities

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**From FY99 through FY04 the Army lost 94 Soldiers to motorcycle accidents; 22 in FY04 alone. Current trends have the Army leadership searching for ways to reduce these numbers.**

bought big bikes and probably would have gotten hurt. They realized by riding these smaller bikes we have, they couldn't control them."

Through Hoffman's and the regiment's initiatives, some 250 riders have been trained as of June, and the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR went from the worst in Special Ops for motorcycle accident rates to the best.

"We were leading the pack in accidents, and now we have the lowest accident rate. In 2005, we have had only one accident and it was not the rider's fault. He was hit from behind while stopped at a stop sign," Hoffman said. "So right now we are doing well. We are at zero for at-fault accidents and just two years ago we were top dog for having [at-fault] accidents."

Hoffman said, the biggest problem the regiment was seeing with riders who were coming back from OIF/OEF was what he called the "bullet-proof mentality."

"We found out that was really leading the charge for these new riders, and it wasn't necessarily the young guys with the crotch rockets, but the older guys who – because they had the money – wanted the status of a big bike like a Harley," Hoffman said. "With us being an aviation unit, many of the Soldiers have said that riding a bike is the closest thing to flying – the freedom of movement, the wind in your hair type of feeling. It's that adrenaline thing."

The trend both in the Army and nationally is that more riders fall in the 40-and-over age group. The NHTSA reported in 2004 that 1,835 motorcyclists were killed in the 40-and-over age group as compared to 244 in the under-20 age group; 991 in the 20-29 age group; and 853 in the 30-39 age group. The only vehicle outpacing the motorcycle in alcohol-related fatalities in the United States is the SUV. But when it comes to getting injured in an alcohol-related accident, motorcycles had seen an increase of 33 percent from 2003 to 2004, far more than any other vehicle type reported by NHTSA.

But is it always the motorcyclists' fault? Not according to statistics compiled by the Ohio State Highway Patrol (OSHP).

"A big part of safe motorcycling is awareness by other vehicle drivers that motorcycles are on the road," states a June 22 motorcycle safety awareness media release from the OSHP. "Ohio crash statistics for 2004 show 1,357 motorcycle-involved crashes were caused by non-motorcycle drivers, including 35 fatal crashes."

Back at the Combat Readiness Center, Evans said that because of the trends the Army is seeing, the Center was chartered in October 2004 to set up a driving task force to look at the problem and come up with some solutions. What the center came up with is an Army Driving and Lifestyle Initiative that is now being looked at by the Army leadership. The main focus Evans noted is that current Army program is good, but it is not properly resourced, including personnel, to the point needed to conduct a good driver's training program. The program, he said, will consist of four modules that will be taught throughout a Soldier's time in the Army. It will have a basic defensive driver course, an intermediate and advanced driver course, and a supervisor's course.

As for the motorcycle side of things, Evans said that it is up to each individual installation to determine what course of instruction they will provide, but he added that the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) is currently on the GSA schedule and that installations can contract with MSF to provide the course. For

more information on the MSF course, visit [www.msf-usa.org/](http://www.msf-usa.org/).

The U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center Web site is located at <https://crc.army.mil/home/>.

**PRELIMINARY LOSS REPORT 0572**  
**MOTORCYCLE CRASH CLAIMS 2 LIVES -- ACCIDENT**  
 Two V Corps Soldiers died in a motorcycle accident on 13 May 2005 at 2350 local in Buedingen, GE. The 33 year-old operator (SGT) and his 30 year old passenger (SGT) were killed when the driver lost control of his Buell motorcycle and struck a guard rail. Both NCOs were wearing helmets and were thrown from the motorcycle. Speed was a factor in this accident. Alcohol is not believed to be a factor in this accident. The driver completed the Motorcycle Safety Foundation course and was properly licensed. Including this accident, there were 62 Class A-C Army Privately Owned Motorcycle accidents from the start of FY05 to 13 May 2005, resulting in 25 Soldier deaths.



Courtesy photo

*Motorcycle fatalities have increased 85 percent over the last seven years in the United States.*